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JUST SAY “AH”
Examining the Office of Medical Services

FAMILY MEMBER MATTERS

Thriving Overseas

BY DOUGLAS E. MORRIS

and above their annual base pay increase of 1.5 percent, and would have happened anyway, so it is not technically part of closing the gap.)

While this is great news, it is important to note that the fight to secure full implementation of OCP is not over. Clearly, the progress in closing the gap has given us greater confidence to anticipate that the third and final adjustment will be implemented in August 2011. However, we cannot be certain of that until Congress authorizes payment and appropriates the necessary funds.

The fiscal situation is very tight and midterm elections are coming this fall. Some legislators have called for reductions in federal salaries; moreover, the proposed \$4 billion cut in the administration's FY 2011 budget request came entirely from the

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international affairs budget, illustrating the perception that domestic concerns come first.

AFSA will remain focused on winning full implementation of OCP and getting permanent authorizing language. We will report developments as they happen because we know that this issue is of paramount concern to our members.

Finally, AFSA thanks Deputy Secretary of State Jacob Lew as he departs the State Department, for the service he has rendered in helping move this solution forward. AFSA appreciates his support and wishes him well as he moves to his next post as director of the Office of Management and Budget.

We also appreciate the leadership of Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Under Secretary for Management Patrick Kennedy as they remain alert and focused on this and other matters. Finally, thank you to the many members of Congress who remain supportive of the Foreign Service. □

Humans are social animals. We crave a connection to others. While we are overseas, far from home, family and close friends, the community life at an embassy takes on an even more pronounced significance.

However, as we all know, each post is different when it comes to community life. What many of us have found is that — for a variety of reasons — the community seems to be tighter at smaller U.S. embassies in less developed nations.

Ankara, where my partner and I were last posted, was like that. There was a deep sense of connection to others, a feeling that you belonged to something greater than yourself, that you were welcomed and celebrated just by being there.

In our current post of Brussels, on the other hand, the community feeling is not as strong. For some, especially accompanying spouses, not having that instant access to a vibrant embassy community life can be rather isolating. Even with everything there is to see and do, the colors can seem faded, the food at the cafés bland, the chocolate less than scrumptious, if you are flying solo most of the time.

What is a person to do? To thrive, rather than just survive, you need to put yourself out there. You need to make that extra effort to fill your life with friends and activities. Here are some community-building suggestions.

1. Head to the Community Liaison Office. With the assistance of the CLO, you will be able to combat your sense of disconnection. For example, during the 2010 World Cup, the CLO in Brussels organized an event at a local sports bar that was packed with American expatriates watching the U.S. play Slovenia. This produced a treasure trove of new social connections.

2. Accept every invitation for the first six to nine months after you arrive. Be like Jim Carrey in “The Yes Man”: Say “yes” to

everything. (Well, maybe not *everything*: I did decline an invitation to take part in the annual Brussels Naked Bike Ride.)

3. Check out the embassy newsletter and any other local English-language periodicals on a regular basis for events and activities, and pursue those that interest you.

4. Consider volunteering. One of the first things I did in Ankara was offer to clean up the CLO library. Just by being there a couple of hours a week, I met almost the entire mission.

5. Find something you enjoy doing, or something new you have always wanted to try — and pursue it. You'll get to know other expats who also enjoy that activity. Wherever I go, I always seem to find fellow darts players, for instance.

A simple Internet search will produce all sorts of possibilities. For example, why not look into the American Women's Club? This organization is no longer exclusively for women, despite its name — so guys need not feel shy about contacting them. Or what about joining a church or other religious organization?

If you still haven't found what you are looking for, there's always one more option:

6. Create your own community. Say, for example, you love the arts, but you do not want to go to the theater or symphony alone. So you create your own “cultural group” by advertising in the embassy newsletter. Voilà! Instant community.

Though not as easy as the instant embrace by a tight-knit embassy community one experiences in smaller posts, creating a connection to others in large posts has the potential to be richer, more rewarding and loads more interesting. □

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